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Abstract

The Florida Parent Education Model, working with 5- to 7-year-olds enrolled in Follow Through programs, is based on the premise that a child's home environment has the most lasting influence on his adaptation to school and to the world around him. The program works with the mother, who, as educators are discovering, has more influence on the child than anyone else. The program recruits parent educators from environments similar to those of mothers with whom they will work. The parent educators visit parents in their homes and provide them with specific tasks to work on with their children. The parent educator is also expected to be a part of the classroom instructional system so she and the teacher collaborate on home tasks to provide both school-relevant and home-relevant behavior in the child. The program at this point appears to be moderately successful. Although, the only information available is subjective, it indicates that parent interest is increased, that parents are working more with children, and that there is more individual and small group instruction in the classroom than ever before. (JF)

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Focus on Parent Education as a Means of Altering the Child's Environment[1]

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It is just before dusk, the air is hot and sultry. A rather old and worn pink Plymouth raises clouds of dust as it moves slowly down a dry dirt road towards a broken wooden house. The porch on the front of the house leans a bit to one side but it is sprinkled nicely with webbed lawn chairs and one old canvas covered reclining lawn chair. The chairs are full with people who seem to be very weary, and bored with life. As the car nears the house, children may be seen running from dirt playgrounds; playgrounds in the sense that this is where they play. A woman appears at the door of the house. She looks tired, but there seems to be a little more life twinkling in her eyes as she watches the car.

The car stops at the house and a trim, attractive, middle aged woman slowly climbs out. As she approaches the house, a little boy approaches her and says "Hi--Miss Maddy." The child appears to be about four or five years old. Miss Maddy has come to visit. Such visits occur once a week and are for the express purpose of helping this mother help her child.

For this visit Miss Maddy has brought a short list of "self-help" words. Words such as shirt, shoe, button, toilet, etc. Miss Maddy sits

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down on the porch with Dale's mother and they talk about the list of words. Mama seems pleased. Why? Someone has come to offer help--not to ask questions about her money, sex life, and child beating but to really give her something to hold onto which might help her little Dale to come out a little better.

A striking thing about Miss Maddy is how much she looks like mama, how much she talks like mama, and how much interest she seems to show in mama.

As the conversation goes on, Dale approaches. He is asked to join the two women; which he does. Mama looks at Miss Maddy, Miss Maddy looks at Dale and says "Dale--can you show me your shoe?" Dale shys back to mama. Mama says, (with an edge on her voice) "Dale, you show Miss Maddy yoah shoe or A'm goin whup you!" He does. At each further question the same thing happens--the mother's approach is one of threat in the instruction of her child. As we watch we notice that the same words are used over and over again. "Do that or A'm goin whup you!" Even when the topic shifts the mother resorts to essentially the same technique--the technique is one of a restrictive mother control type--"don't say no more than I want you to say, and the rest of the time stay out from under my feet!" Be careful now, don't get the wrong idea. There is no lack of love in this home. Ask mama and her answer will be, "I love my kids, I want to help them, sometimes I'm too busy, sometimes I'm too tired, but I want to help."

One of the basic problems is that the mother doesn't know how to help. She doesn't know what to do or when to do it. The cycle is perpetuated. Her children grow up with all the biological propensity to have children but without the educational background to help them once they've borne them. Educating the adult to become a helping parent is of paramount importance in changing the child's early environment and his adjustment to that environment.

Addressing himself to this problem, Ira J. Gordon, in the fall of 1966, began a parent education program as an attempt to break the poverty cycle. The program was designed for infants, and presently is working with two- to three-year-old children.

The basic underlying rationale for the program is that in order to break up this so-called "poverty cycle" the best place to start is with mothers who, contrary to some of professional educators' fondest dreams, have more influence on their children than practically anyone else in our society.

In an investigation of deprived Negro mothers, Wortis made the rather interesting observation that "the physical and familial environment was serving a preparation function for incorporating these children into the lower-lower class"(Gordon, 1969, p. 25). The mothers seem to be restricted from performing otherwise. They are unable to help their children move away from the lower-lower class into which they are born. Other investigators have arrived at much the same conclusion, i. e. one basic problem lies in the mother's inability to teach her child the kinds of activities that will, indeed, help him to succeed in school and to advance in American life.

The "Parent Educator Model" being used in Florida with infants and two- to three-year-olds, and now being used in a number of communities across the United States with five- to seven-year-olds, is based on the clear and simple notion that the first place to hit, and hit hard, is the home. Without changes in parental behavior towards a child there is little reason to expect that changes produced through the school will last. Consider the simple proportions of time of contact. A school may have a kindergartner for three to four hours a day--the parent has him for 20-21 hours. Granted--some may be sleeping hours, but how many are left? What that parent does is not only worth considering with respect to the child's early learning, but also to what the school can do once the child is dumped on its doorstep to be "educated."

The thrust of this program is on visiting parents in their homes and providing them with very specific tasks to work on with their children. These tasks are school relevant, child relevant, and mother relevant. If the mother is successful in teaching the task to her child in the way modeled by the parent educator, there is a high likelihood that the mother will try other tasks. If she fails--perhaps it is too obvious for further comment--she is not likely to consider this a valuable or worthwhile undertaking. She is quite likely to insist that the school is just what she thought it was anyway--an outfit designed to control her, her child, and their lives. If this happens, it is probably safe to assume that there will be no change in the child's home environment.

How, then, does one go about instituting Parent Education activities?

The first step is to get into the homes of children enrolled in Follow Through programs. This can be a bit tough for a WASP such as me. But it is not nearly so hard for a mother who comes from an environment similar to that of the visited mother. She speaks the language, knows the customs, plays the part in every respect while I would be fortunate, indeed, to play it in even a small part. Therefore, we recruit mothers from the areas to be worked with. We then teach them something about how one can teach children effectively. An attempt is now made to help them to show and teach parents how to do the task with their children. Indeed, this step is critical to the success of the program.

The step of teaching prospective Parent Educators is begun at the University of Florida during workshops held in the summer. The attempt is made to provide the Parent Educators with a basic understanding of what a child looks like in terms of his cognitive development at around five to six years of age. Most of this is done in terms of Piaget's descriptions of children. As the Parent Educator begins to grasp these relatively basic concepts of child development she is moved to the task of learning how to teach children

in the performance of tasks which are specific to both a child's problems and to the developmental steps described by Piaget. The focus is, of course, on the child and his completion of tasks exemplifying the position taken by Piaget. We have generally made a very loose interpretation of Piaget's work. The result is that only a very few basic notions ever get transmitted to the teachers and Parent Educators in the Follow Through program.

Probably the most important phase of the training process is the opportunity for teachers and Parent Educators to work with real children under the observation of faculty members who are acquainted with the Follow Through program. It seems to us that one very effective way of learning how not to make mistakes with children is to first make them and then be helped in ways of avoiding the situation which produced the mistake in the first place. At the same time, this procedure should permit the Parent Educators and teachers to feel freer to work together and attempt new tasks and ideas with the children. Whether or not it actually does is not yet completely determined. We do have the rather subjective evidence, however, that there is a very real difference in most of the Follow Through centers currently using this model. Those of us who have observed home visits and classrooms both at the beginning of the school year and again quite recently are convinced that changes have taken place. One might even be tempted to say that the classrooms are somewhat more "friendly" than they were before the Parent Education model was implemented.

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The work with the Parent Educators just described serves primarily to assist them to function in the classroom. This is another integral part of the Florida Parent Education Program. First, we expect the Parent Educators to make home visits and second, we expect them to be a part of the classroom instructional system. Our concept of teacher aide seems to be somewhat different than the usual one found in educational circles. Many of us have

seen teacher aides working only in the capacity of one who takes the roll, mixes the paint, hands out paper, passes out lunches and milk, and performs various other housekeeping activities. The teacher, of course, because of higher education, has the "supreme skill," and the "unique ability" to deal with children and therefore does the "teaching" of the children. The assumption in most educational programs is that one cannot teach unless one has a college degree in education. Our position is that the Parent Educator can and must be used in the classroom as an aid to instruction. That is, she must teach. All of her teaching activity, needless to say, will be under the supervision of the teacher and much of it, at least initially, should be under the observation of the teacher. The teacher is by law, custom, and training, in charge of the classroom and must remain in charge. Our expectation is that the teacher will maintain control of the general activities of the classroom. The Parent Educator will be on hand to help the teacher perform the activities she desires to perform. This, of course, requires a rather new interpretation by the teacher of the role expectation of the classroom aide. Part of this new interpretation begins at the workshops in Florida. We make no pretense of having finished the job here. Continuing contact and in-service education is an important part of our relationship to the Follow Through Communities. It is not easy for a teacher who has accepted as fact the position that teachers are the only ones who can teach, to admit that perhaps others can teach; especially when these "others" have had little formal education in "how to teach." We, therefore provide continuing in-service sessions for both Parent Educators and teachers.

Generally, while in the classroom, the Parent Educators are involved with relatively specific tasks which are relevant to the overall curriculum. These tasks are designed, of course, to meet the needs of particular children. At times, the Parent Educator is likely to be seen working with small groups of

children; at times with one child; and at times with the entire classroom of children. The decision as to which activity is engaged in at any particular time is left to the judgment of the teacher.

This judgment, however, is not left solely to the teacher with her purportedly "astute clinical eye." At this point, the Parent Educator and the teacher must become very close, indeed, in the way they deal with the child and his problems. The two of them must sit down together and decide exactly what must be done with little Johnny Jones to best help him perform the activities demanded by his school. Tasks are arranged around this conference with respect to all that has gone on before. The decision must be school relevant and home relevant. Remember--a task is now going to be made which the Parent Educator will take into the home and ask the mother to perform with her child. It had better match the mother's expectations. Any lack of match at this point and the program is very likely to fail in the sense that the mother in the home, who is very busy and preoccupied, may see no relevance of the task to either home life or school life. The task must center on the needs of the child and the expectations of the parent. We are, indeed, trying to change parents but remember the old maxim--"Begin where they are." This is precisely what we are trying to do. For example--in one center one of the very first tasks taken into the home involved the child in learning his name--both spoken and written. This is relevant to parents. It is not too relevant to parents for someone to tell them that their child must have a great deal of "free play." It is particularly not relevant to a parent who is very busy with other things. The parent sees her child at "free play" for many hours during the day, in fact one of her major ambitions is very likely to get her child to do just free play and to leave her alone. The fact, however, that the child knows his name and perhaps where he lives is important to the parent. The children in this program went home with name tags--they could look at them,

tell their parents about them, say the words, and most important, learn that thing which mama and papa thought important. The moral is, of course, take them where they are.

Our attempt is not to impose a brand new and different set of values on the parents, but rather to superimpose values on already existing and worthwhile values. This, it seems to me, is the method likely to have the highest payoff. So--the task taken into the home is collaborated on between Parent Educator and teacher in a way which will provide both school relevant and home relevant behavior in the child. This is no easy task and is not to be entered into inadvisedly--that is, by either Parent Educator or school teacher without the collaboration of the other.

In addition, a central framework for task development is highly relevant--we have selected what might be called a neo-Piagetian framework. I think the importance of such a framework lies primarily in the fact that it is systematic. Much of the child's behavior which produces school and adjustment problems lies in the unsystematic and relatively random nature of his home environment. Our focus is to provide a little less randomness and a little more system into that environment through instruction and help given mothers by Parent Educators.

How can we tell if we are accomplishing what we set out to do? One way is through a relatively systematic way of looking at what goes on between child and teacher, and child and Parent Educator. For this purpose we have selected a series of observational systems. Not all of these may be completely appropriate to the task at hand, but all of them do provide some feedback into the activities emerging between the central figures. We do not, unfortunately, have sufficient information gathered by an external observer of the activity that takes place in the home between the parent and Parent Educator. At present we are relying solely on a single form which is completed by the Parent Educator following each home visit. In at least one center, this

will change next year since the coordinator will plan on making regular home visits with her Parent Educators. We may have to devise a systematic way for her to observe the interactions between the Parent Educator and the parent in this setting. This may be a notable improvement in this center next year.

At the present time, all of our techniques for systematic observation are centered on classroom activities. The reason for this is partly due to the fact that education has customarily been considered a function of the classroom--period. Parents have been involved, perhaps, in P.T.A. or other parent groups; often in little else, and often not even in that. We are asking parents to become teachers of their children, teachers who can supplement and not discourage classroom activities, teachers who can help their children overcome the condition of poverty, teachers who can break the poverty cycle, teachers who can, indeed, move their children to heights previously unknown to members of a mistreated social class.

In conclusion, the Florida Parent Education Model is based on the premise that a child's home environment is the place which has the most lasting and powerful influence on his adaptation to school and to the world around him. We therefore start with mothers in the home. We next make the assumption that those persons most likely to have a recognizable influence on mothers are persons much like them. Therefore--we recruit Parent Educators from environments similar to those of mothers with whom they will work.

The Parent Educators build their contacts with the mothers around specific tasks which have child relevance, school relevance, and home relevance. Finally, the process is monitored through systematic observation techniques designed to pick up and record specific activities seen in the classroom and through a weekly report filled out by the Parent Educator for each home visit made.

Our success at this point appears to be adequate. We have only subjective information of how the program is working, and that information indicates that

1) in most Parent Education Programs parent interest is increased;
2) parents are working more with their children than ever before;
3) classrooms seem to have changed--there is more individual and small group instruction than before and the classrooms--at least subjectively--seem happier.

What must we do next?

If we have erred in our approach it seems to have been on the side of being too specific with respect to tasks and not specific enough in other areas of parent-child relations. In the future we intend to intervene even more. We want Parent Educators to help parents realize more than ever before the importance of constant and consistent activity with their children. Miss Maddy will no longer sit quietly by, but will move actively to help Dale's mother see the alternatives to a threatening environment for her child. Miss Maddy will be taught principles of child rearing so that she, in turn, can help Dale's mother to better manage the home environment in a truly loving way.

Although I find it difficult to accept all of his conclusions, Arthur Jensen (1969) in a recent edition of the Harvard Educational Review made a statement which I think appropriately summarizes our approach. He wrote, "there is much more we can do to improve school performance through environmental means than we can do to change intelligence per se." (p. 59)

In the future--our work with children in the age range five to seven years of age will focus even more than it now does on the modification of

the most important aspect of the child's environment, the hardworking, easily misled, sometimes lazy, but do not forget, always loving mother.

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